

“Out of the Fish’s Mouth”

Matthew 17: 24-27

²⁴When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax[¶] came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?”[¶] ²⁵He said, “Yes, he does.” And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” ²⁶When Peter[¶] said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free. ²⁷However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin;[¶] take that and give it to them for you and me.”

This week, we are turning our attention from the Old Testament to the New Testament as we continue to make our way through just a few of the weird stories found within our Bible. Today, we hear a story found within the Gospel of Matthew. It references the temple tax and how Peter is supposed to find a coin within a fish’s mouth to pay this tax. To say that this story is weird is an understatement and we find ourselves asking once more, “As people of faith, what are we supposed to do with this crazy story?”

For us to understand what is going on in this text, we need to take a look at what is happening around it. In the previous verses, we hear the story of the transfiguration of Jesus followed by a prediction about Jesus’s death and resurrection. This really does not answer our question of how this story fits into the larger narrative around it. So we need to take a look at Chapter 18. In Chapter 18, the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the Kingdom followed by a

conversation about putting stumbling blocks in the path of those who are new to the faith.

We realize that this weird story about the temple tax and the coin out of the fish's mouth works better with the verses which follow it rather than the verses before it because they all echo the same theme: Community. This weird story and the verses which follow it are about how the disciples are to interact with others as part of living out the values of the Kingdom of God, values such as love and grace, values such as relationship and connection, values such as understanding that what we do as individuals affects others, affects the whole.

The background for this weird story is that in "in pre-70 CE Judaism, (before the Gospel of Matthew was written), it was generally assumed that loyal Jews would pay a temple tax. However, precisely who should pay, how much, and how the tax was related to Scripture were all disputed issues." Matthew builds upon this familiar community based disputed issue while writing his Gospel to shine a light on issues which his own community is facing.

In our text today, Peter is asked about the Temple tax. Peter replies that Jesus pays it. Then Peter goes to where Jesus is staying. Jesus immediately knows about the conversation about the temple tax and asks this weird question about earthly kings and whether or not they tax their children.

The reason for this is Matthew wants to point out to his own community that, like how earthly kings do not tax their children, God does not tax the children of God. Jesus wants his disciples to understand that this conversation around the temple tax is part of system designed by humans to deal with human concerns. BUT as Jesus also cautions his disciples, just because the temple tax is a part of human concerns, this does not alleviate the disciples' responsibility towards it. The Temple is a sign of community. It is the place for people to come together as one. The Temple is the representation of the whole. All are responsible for it. All are called to support it. All are a part of it.

Using this story in a Post-Easter context, Matthew wants his own community to understand that while the conversation about the Temple tax is no longer needed because the Temple no longer exists, the principle behind the conversation still remains relevant, that principle being: the children of God are free “but that freedom is subject to restrictions for the sake of the brothers and sisters in the church as well as those outside of their community of faith.”

Examples of this are: as Christians who sometimes eat meat, we will often go vegetarian especially if we are breaking bread with someone who has made the conscious decision to give meat because we do not want to offend them.

Or as Christians who sometimes enjoy a glass of wine, we will forgo this choice if we are breaking bread with one who has struggled with alcoholism. We do not want our choices to be a stumbling block to anyone. We honor their journey and choices because that is what it means to be fully present at the Table with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

You see, Matthew understands our call as people of faith to be grounded in the understanding that the Kingdom of God is here, but not yet, that we know that the Kingdom of God is here, among us, but we also know that it is not fully realized here on Earth as it is in Heaven. As people of faith, this understanding of the Kingdom of God shapes our interactions with others. We realize that all are a part of it. All are called to be in community because of it. All are connected through it.

And because of these connections, because we have been transformed by the resurrection, we are free, but that does not mean as the people of God, we only need to be concerned about our wants and needs. As people of faith, as ones who live out this here by not yet understanding of the Kingdom of God, we cannot abuse this freedom at the expense of others. Or let me say it this way....it is not all about us as individuals. It is about us as a community.

That is why at the end of the story, Jesus tells Peter to pay the tax... to affirm this understanding of community, this understanding of connection, this understanding of our responsibility to and for each other. The fact that the coin to pay the tax is found in a fish's mouth...Well, that is a completely different type of fish tale. Many commentators think Matthew was using this part of the story as a miracle story to strengthen his point. But I will let you draw your own conclusions about that.

What is important for us, today and all days, is that this story, no matter how weird it may be, again reiterates the understanding that as people of faith, as people who have experienced the possibilities of the Kingdom of God, are called to live in community with one another, to be in relationship with one another, to show the world that there is another way to be that is not based solely on my wants or my needs but it about all of us, as one, one body, one faith, one baptism, made whole. This weird fish tale reminds us that we are to live out our call to be disciples of Christ here and now so that all may know the love and grace of the Kingdom of God. Because no one is free until we are all free.

I have to tell you it seems like I stand behind this pulpit and say the same thing every week. ok well, maybe not last week when we were talking about the bear attack. But for the most part, 51 out of the 52 Sundays every year, it always comes back to us, living in community. It always comes back to our connection to

one another. It always comes back to us being in relationship with one another. It always comes back to us as people of faith showing this world that there is another way to be, a way not based on power or might but based on mercy, grace, and love.

As we take a look at this weird sort of fish tale, maybe it is time we begin embracing what the stories in our sacred text, even the weird ones, are telling us to do. Maybe it is time we begin practicing what we preach. Maybe it is time we realize that no one is free unless we are all free. Maybe it is time we realize that out of the Fish's mouth, comes the Truth for us as the people of God....that Truth being, to live out our call of community so that all may experience the possibilities of the Kingdom of God here on Earth as it is in Heaven. May it be so. Amen.